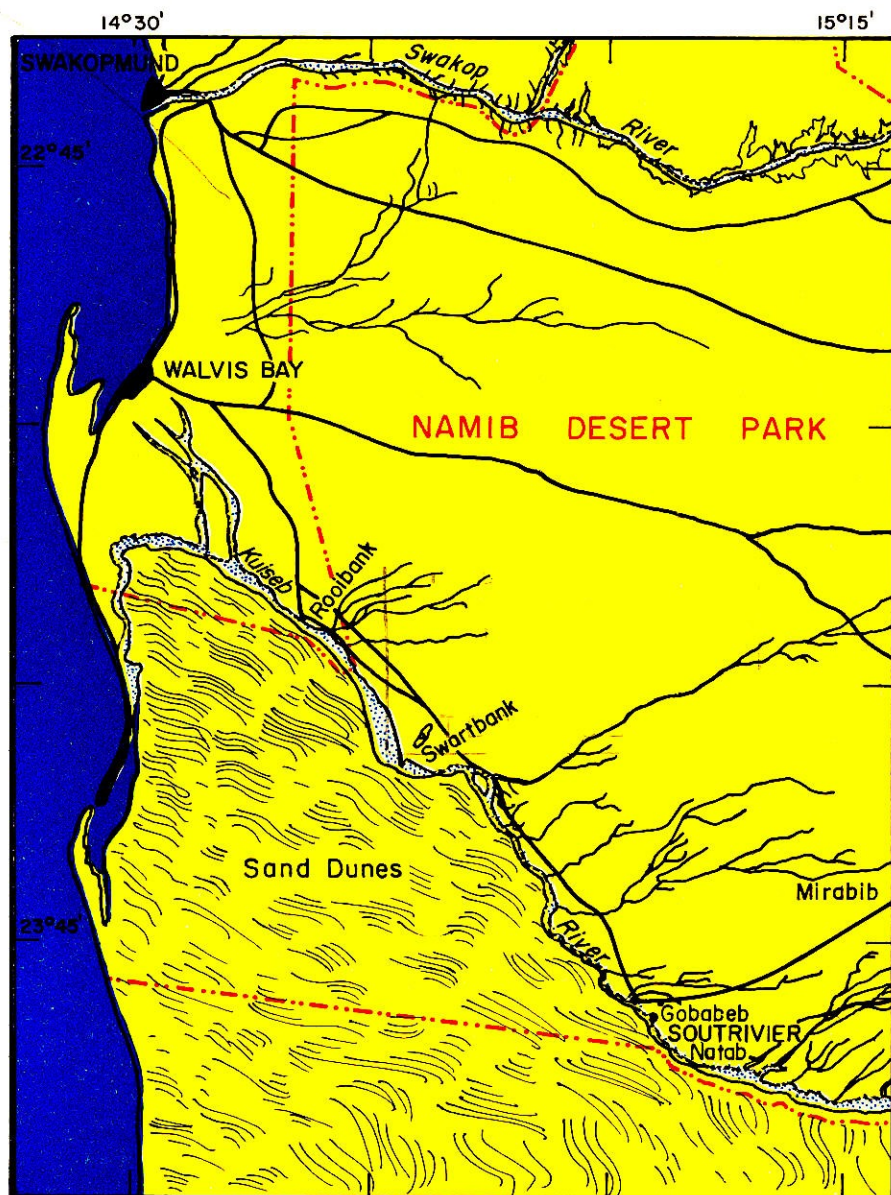


January 1977

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Ursula Dentlinger

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The !Nara Plant in the Topnaar
Hottentot Culture of Namibia:
Ethnobotanical Clues to an
8,000-year-old Tradition

Ursula Dentlinger

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Cover illustration: Map of West Central
Namibia, showing the Kusiseb River and
Topnaar sites

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of this study, Ursula Dentlinger, is a Namibian by birth. She received her B.A. in anthropology from the University of Cape Town in 1973 and is presently completing an honors degree at Stellenbosch University.

Ms. Dentlinger is trilingual in German, English and Afrikaans, and is studying the Nama language. She says that growing up in contact with the Nama-speaking peoples of Namibia made her "eager to do research among them."



Ms. Dentlinger's study of a village on the Kuiseb River forms a part of a paleo-ecological research project in the Namib Desert under the direction of Professor Beatrice Sandelowsky, of the University of Cape Town. Dr. Sandelowsky was also born in Namibia and received her early education there. After a year at Heidelberg University, she received her B.A. from Rochester University and her Ph.D. in anthropology from Berkeley in 1972. She has published more than twenty papers on archeology, non-Western art and archaeobotany.

AN ETHNOBOTANICAL STUDY OF THE !NARA PLANT AMONG THE TOPNAAR HOTTENTOTS OF NAMIBIA

Ursula Dentlinger

INTRODUCTION

The genesis of the present study lies in a suggestion by Dr. Beatrice Sandelowsky. At the time of my first visit to the Namib Desert Park in 1973, Dr. Sandelowsky had been stationed at the Namib Desert Research Institute for nearly a year, engaged in archeological excavation at the Mirabib Hill Shelter. The most obvious and readily identifiable plant remains in all the archeological layers of the Mirabib site were the seeds of an endemic cucurbit, the !nara¹ (Acanthosicyos horrida) whose habitat is the high desert dunes. The oldest of the seed-coat fragments was dated at approximately 8000 years.

These seed remains imply that the nara was fairly intensively used in prehistoric times. The plant does not grow in the vicinity of the site today, and paleoecological research indicates that during the past eight millennia there were no sand dunes high enough to support its growth in quantity. The seeds would therefore have had to be transported over considerable distances.

Today the nara plays an important role in the economy of the Topnaar people, who live in small villages on the northern bank of the Kuiseb River. Dr. Sandelowsky felt that an ethnobotanical study of the plant in this present-day context -- its use as a source of food

and its part in the cultural fabric of village life -- could well cast some light on the utilization of the nara as part of an old tradition, perhaps as an analogy with the prehistoric situation. To this end she had established contact with informants among the Topnaar and had collected a certain amount of data which, when I undertook a more thorough investigation, enabled me to start at a point that would otherwise have taken some time to reach.

I began a month's intensive study in February 1974, spent a week in the field in July of that year, and another week in August 1975.

METHOD

In consultation with Dr. Sandelowsky, I prepared a list of questions on which I was to seek information among the #Aunin (Topnaar) in the village of /U//khaeb (Soutrivier). A short questionnaire was administered daily on an informal basis to one or two persons at each homestead, and a longer, more formal one was administered to nine persons -- two women and seven men -- in interviews that were recorded on tape. A third questionnaire, drawn up in July and administered to informants living in villages other than Soutrivier, investigated a number of matters that had arisen in the course of working with the earlier data.

A young man, Hendrik Swartbooi, was chosen as main informant and interpreter. He could speak both Afrikaans and Nama, and he stayed in the village. Since it was not possible for me to stay at Soutrivier, I was accommodated in a caravan on the bank of the Kuiseb just below the Namib Desert Research Institute, from which I walked over to Soutrivier every morning.

I established contact mainly through taking laundry from the Institute's white staff to be washed by the women at Soutrivier. Because the river was in flood during February 1974 and the sandy water was of no

use for washing, the women depended on me for clean water. I was eager to help, since this was one avenue through which contact could be maintained, and I therefore periodically transported water by car.

As soon as the children saw me approaching from a distance they would come running, wondering what food or gadgets I had brought with me. They would spend hours singing or talking onto tape and then listening, with peals of laughter, to their voices being played back. Often they would give me nara pips in return for some rusks. This was one way of finding out whether nara had recently been picked. Only at a later stage did I establish rapport with the men, who seemed slightly withdrawn at first.

Depending on the welcome I received, I would remain at a homestead to chat and ask my questions, or if the situation were unfavorable I would wander off to another homestead. During very windy days, when it was unpleasant to move around, I would spend some of the day taking part in a game called //hūs, played with stones, on the sheltered side of a homestead. At lunchtime I would follow the general inclination to retire to the shade of a large tree on the river bank, where I had the opportunity to make additional notes. For example, in order to understand the kinship network better, I used index cards to record the particulars of each person in the village.

To put the use of the nara in perspective with the use of other plants known to the Topnaar people, I made a trip to the Mirabib Hills where, since it had rained, many animals and plants were in evidence. I took with me three informants, who identified the plants. The procedure used was that each plant, numbered and tagged by me, was given its Nama name and its use by the informants. This information was taped, and later the plants were identified by a botanist.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

The Topnaar are mentioned as early as 1838, by Sir James Alexander.² They belong to the Nama-speaking group and are an offshoot of the Rooi Nasie, one of the five tribes of the Nama. Their Nama name, !Aunin, is from !aub, meaning "the point," which refers to their migration in 1820 to the seacoast, the extreme point of occupation of any Nama group.³ Another name for them is !Naranin, derived from the nara fruit.⁴ From Dutch traders at Walvis Bay they received the name Topnaar, a literal translation of !Aunin. The Topnaar living along the Kuiseb, as well as a small group living at Sesfontein, are also called !Gomen.⁵

W. Palgrave, who made a journey of exploration inland from Walvis Bay in the 1870s, counted 750 Topnaar, of whom 150-200 were living at Walvis Bay.⁶ In March 1966, T. Jenkins and C. K. Brain estimated a figure of 130 Topnaar along the Kuiseb.⁷ They added that this did not reflect the total population, since many inhabitants were away from their homes, working either in Walvis Bay or in road construction camps.

At the beginning of the last century a group of migratory Topnaar trekked southward from Sesfontein under their leader, Khaxab, and eventually settled along the Kuiseb. Some, however, remained in Sesfontein, and a few individual Topnaar are known to be living in Windhoek.⁹

Very little is known about the social organization of the Topnaar. Koehler quotes from a "Memo on Walvis Bay," dated the 20th of April 1891:¹⁰ "The Census reports show forth prominently two significant features: (a) small families; (b) the excess of females over males." With reference to the latter point, he suggests that many of these females were refugees from the German Protectorate, and that their husbands or natural protectors had been killed during the tribal wars. In 1957 Koehler found the families still to be small, but the number of women did not exceed that of men. Visiting among the families was common, reflecting the relationship within the sib.

Since the Topnaar consider themselves to belong to the Nama people, we assume that their social structure resembles that of the other Nama. But this should be verified in the course of more intensive study.

There were seven Nama tribes: the Gei # Khauan (Rooi Nasie), the !Gami # Nun (Bondelswarts), the //Haboben (Veldskoendraers), the !Khara Gei Khoin (the Simon Kopper tribe or Franzmanns), the //Khau /Goan (Swartboois), the //O Gein (Groot Doode), and the #Aunin or !Naranin (Topnaars). The Rooi Nasie was considered the senior tribe, and the #Aunin (Topnaar) and the //O Gein (Groot Doode) were offshoots of the Rooi Nasie.¹²

Each tribe comprised a number of patrilineal clans, one of which claimed seniority and chieftainship over the tribe as a whole. Chieftainship was hereditary in the senior clan.¹³ Small as the tribes were, they were too numerous to remain together at any one place for long. They scattered over the country in smaller groups, each consisting of a clan or a tribe or some part thereof. The size of such a mobile group could range between 200 and 300 members. They often moved around in the vicinity of a watering place, to which they returned repeatedly, considering it their own on the basis of frequent and sole use. There were no individual or family rights to land. Strangers trekking through the territory were allowed certain privileges.

It appears that the Topnaar settled along the Kuiseb under the leadership of a certain Frederick Khaxab, who is also mentioned in connection with the establishment of the Rhenish Mission Station at Rooibank in 1845. At that time he was living at Sand Fontein, an island three miles off the coast and to the south of Walvis Bay. A subsidiary chief or "captain" called //Neixab was living at Rooibank then.¹⁴ Palgrave, in his list of chiefs of the various peoples of South West Africa, mentions a certain "Frederick" as the chief of the Topnaar.¹⁵

I myself did not find evidence of a formal political organization among the people of the Kuiseb, though one of the informants mentioned that their leader today was a certain Stephan, who lived at Walvis Bay.

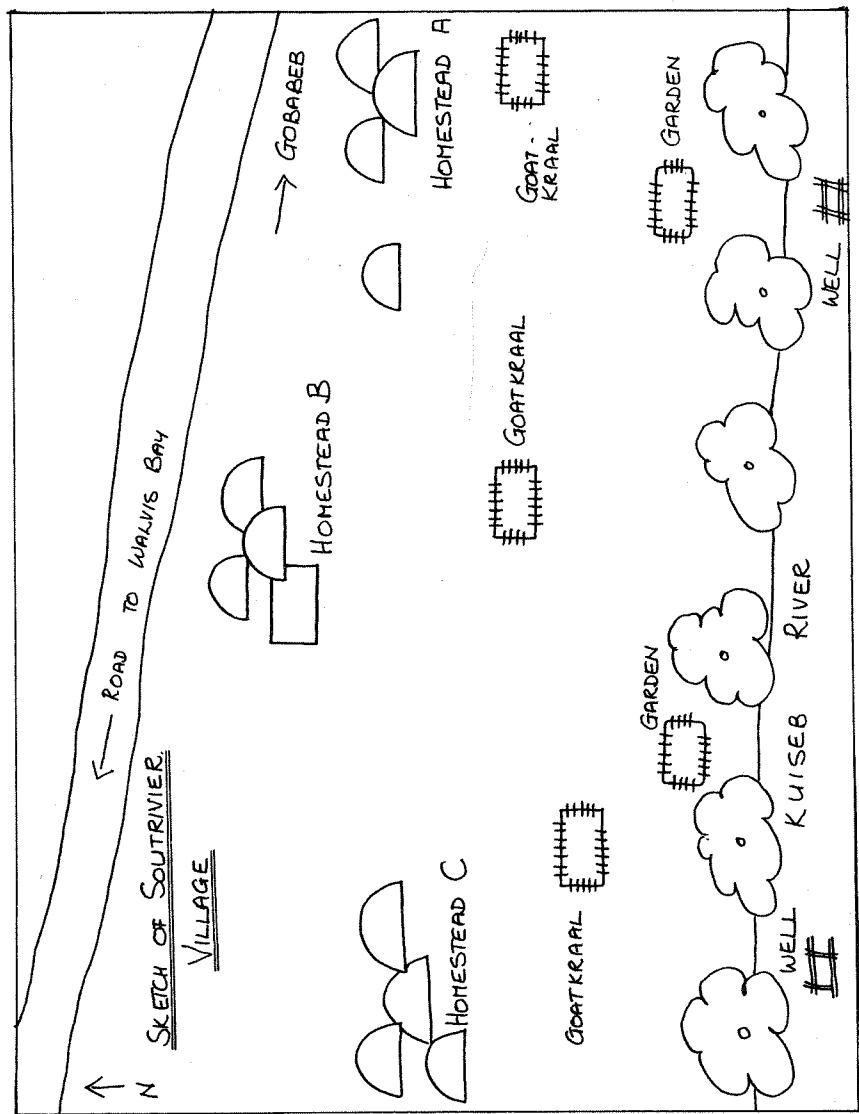
THE STUDY AREA

In 1974 six of the Topnaar villages on the right bank of the Kuiseb River were inhabited. People living here would sometimes mention names of other villages -- for example, Natab and Hoduaub -- that were not inhabited at the time. An archaeological survey revealed remains of still older, abandoned village sites, which were not known to the people. A human skeleton, found close to the bank of the Kuiseb, was dated by the Carbon 14 method as being slightly more than 700 years old.

The villages are situated on the stony, northern bank of the Kuiseb River, because shifting red sand dunes impinge on the river bed from the south (see map). The river, with its underground water and the vegetation it supports, resembles a longitudinal oasis dividing the sand dune desert from the gravelly desert plains. The nara plants grow in the dune area, where their roots can reach the underground water needed for their growth.¹⁶ On the northern bank, only isolated, stunted nara bushes are found. Their easternmost occurrence en masse along the Kuiseb is at Nara Valley, which today is a dune valley, though earlier it probably constituted a tributary of the Kuiseb. Here the plants grow on or through sandy hummocks, some of which are 8 to 10 meters high, up to a point where a ridge of transverse dunes cuts across the valley.

Soutrivier is a small village, 15 km upstream from Nara Valley and 5 km downstream from the Namib Desert Research Institute. The Institute was built on the site of an abandoned village called /Nomabeb, "The Place of the Fig-Tree." White persons probably had trouble pronouncing this correctly and it is now known as Gobabeb. A compound has been built here for the non-Whites who work at the Institute, and the first Topnaar families moved into the compound in 1975.

Soutrivier, situated on the very edge of the nara area, can be seen as a link between villages closer to or within the nara area and those beyond it. Of the latter, only one, Oswater, was inhabited at the time of the study, but it is a noteworthy place because the "Kaiser



of the Kuiseb" lives there. Wealth, mostly in the form of goats, has earned him his title. However, apart from that, he and his wife play important roles in the kinship and social networks of the Topnaar along the Kuiseb.

THE VILLAGE

The village of Soutrivier consists of three homesteads, 200-300 meters apart, three goat kraals, two gardens and two water holes. (For convenience the homesteads are referred to hereafter as Homesteads A, B, and C, respectively.)

The water holes are dug in the sandy bed of the Kuiseb, their depth depending on the water table at the particular season. When the water depth is more than a meter, a scaffolding of wooden poles or other suitable material is constructed to prevent the loose sand from falling in. Drawing-wells are then set up on the principle of the shadoof, and water is drawn out by the bucket. When the river comes down in flood, these wells are destroyed, with the result that clean water is scarce.

The river bank at Soutrivier is broad and flat, with tall Acacia albidae and Acacia giraffae trees providing shade. The round garden patches, up to 5 meters in diameter, are enclosed with tree trunks, poles, branches and bark to keep out goats and chickens. An assortment of maize, kaffir-corn, tomatoes, sweet potatoes and pumpkins constitutes the garden patch. Buckets of water have to be carried to keep it going. When this was not done by one of the members of Homestead A, the garden dried up in February 1974. Gardens play a minor role compared to the effort given to tending goats, donkeys and chickens, which are owned individually. A frequent topic of conversation is the problem of providing food for these animals and of protecting them from Nature Conservation Officers, who fear that the presence of too many domestic animals might upset the ecological equilibrium in a game park.



Chicken pens are built of meshed wire or they may be little stockades of poles and branches. Some of them are on the edge of the tree line, where they can be seen from the higher-lying huts, while others are close to the huts.

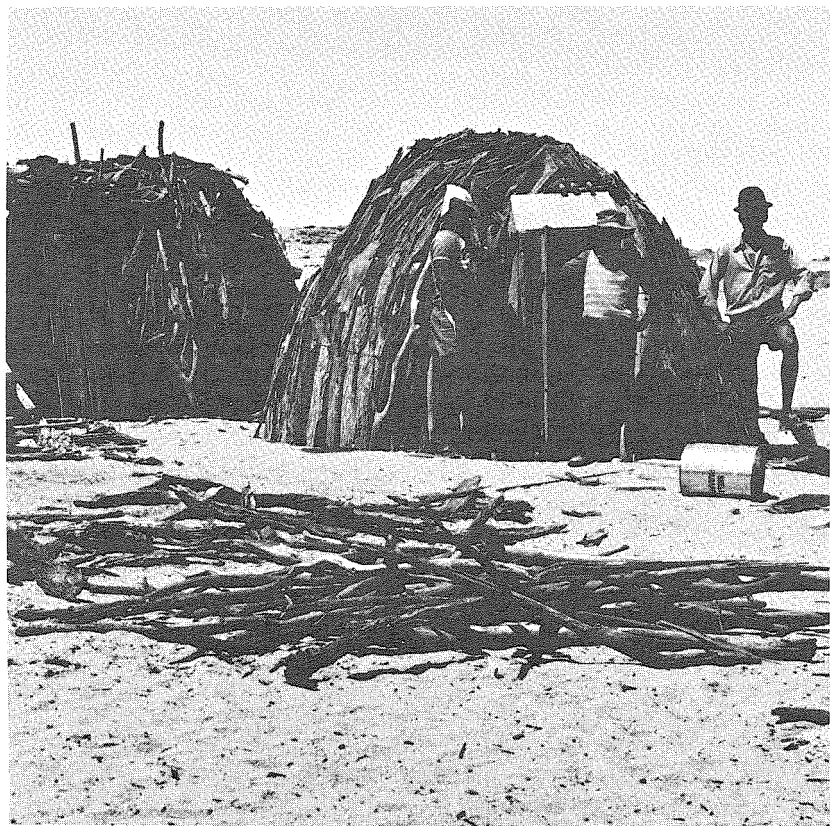
The lean, tick-infested dogs are less well-cared for. Cats lead their own independent lives, tolerated and tolerating. The goats, which are milked at least once a day, spend the night in well-built, stockaded enclosures with subdivisions for lambs.

A homestead consists of sleeping huts and one or two food-preparation huts. The area between the huts is used as living space, sometimes enclosed and partly roofed over. Inside, the larger huts are often subdivided by poles. On the floor of the sleeping huts are skins and mats.

In February 1974 I had the opportunity to participate in the building of a typical conical hut. One of the workers at the Institute had taken two days off to build himself a house. The old one, some 5 meters from the site of the new, had been partly broken down. Building began by digging holes approximately 50 centimeters deep, into which curved poles were firmly inserted. These poles were then bound together at the top with wire. The spaces between were closed by diagonally-fastened branches, also bound with wire. Pieces of bark, like a pattern of tiles, filled the remaining gaps. As the builder needed more branches and bark, these were taken from the half-demolished old hut. Eventually the area was littered with building material, which was later cleared away. The finishing touches were added in the form of a large plastic sheet, stuck between branches as a windbreak, and a piece of planking to act as a door.

The breaking down of old huts and the building of new ones seems to be a continuous process in the villages along the Kuiseb.

In addition to the traditional conical huts in the village, there are a few square huts with flat roofs. The most prominent of these is a wooden room built of finished lumber. It is situated on the highest river



terrace, about 20 meters from the gravel road that leads from the Institute to Walvis Bay. Johanna Fischer lives here, an imposing, matriarchal personality. She is usually surrounded by a group of skinny, clamoring children, whom she pretends to keep in order with a long whip. Two other adults, Albina Engelbrecht, mother of five, and Simon /Gurisab, live in this homestead (Homestead B) on a permanent basis. Simon, a fairly young man, is an exception in that he does not work either in town or at the Institute. This may be because of poor health, but at the same time his contribution toward the care of the children is obviously needed. A number of them are pre-school age children of relatives who work in town. The greatest problem is the provision of food. When one sees the children eating the unpalatable dry pulp of the acacia pods, it is a sign that the larder is empty again.

The other two homesteads lie equidistant from this one on the lower terraces closer to the river. Sebedeus is the head of the family living in Homestead A, closest to Gobabeb, with his wife, Katrina, and her old mother. Their grown daughter, Charlotte, was with them in 1974, as were three young men called Willem, Hendrik and Michiel. Charlotte had just had her first baby. Frans, a bachelor obsessed with his search for a wife, had his own quarters, consisting of two huts and a small enclosure linking them, separate from the central group of huts.

Gert is the most flamboyant member of the household group in Homestead C, on the other side of the village. This is the largest homestead, in which sixteen individuals were living in February 1974.

POPULATION

Traveling and visiting are important aspects of life in a Topnaar village, so much so that during the first month of the study it was difficult to know who belonged to the resident population. Apart from the fairly regular traffic of schoolchildren coming home for

the school holidays or paying visits, the smaller children go to town to visit their parents who work there. Women from town may come out for the school holidays with the children. Relatives from farms and from the Nama Reserve may visit for days, weeks, or even months. People go off for similar periods to work for construction firms, mines, in town or on farms.

In 1957 Koehler recorded 21 inhabitants in Soutrivier.¹⁷ Ten years later Jenkins and Brain counted a total of 24 people.¹⁸ In February 1974, 32 people were living at Soutrivier, including one male with affinal ties with the inhabitants.

On my return to Soutrivier in July 1974, I found that 10 people, 6 of them men, had left the village. The reason given was invariably the need to go and look for food, work, or money. In fact, I found that these three words were used interchangeably. Occasionally someone also went off to see relatives, tend them if they were ill, or find out what had happened to someone who had left. The same observation was made in villages other than Soutrivier.

The fluctuation in the population figures reflects the mobility of the people, and raises the question of whether this is a dictate of the present situation or is the traditional way of life.

Over the past ten years, conscientious enforcement of conservation rules has had significant consequences for the Topnaar living in a Nature Reserve. They no longer hunt, and the numbers and even the existence of their livestock are now threatened. Whereas formerly the most direct economic investment of energy may have been in hunting and livestock, this is no longer so. The coastal towns of Swakopmund and Walvis Bay have grown, and the fishing industry offers employment. The mining industry in the area has developed enormously, calling into being large schemes, such as the 60-kilometer pipeline that carries water from the Kuiseb River to the Rössing Uranium Mine. Along the edge of the Namib Desert, during the last thirty years, fenced farms have been established, where previously man and animal could roam at will. The game park itself has been

fenced and cannot be entered without a permit. The Research Institute, founded in 1963, has attracted people to areas not previously visited and to work not done before.

THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Koehler¹⁹ quotes from a report written by Palgrave in 1891 that the Topnaar at that time earned their living from:

- a. The harvest of nara kernels: "In the !nara season from January to May, the people leave their homes and camp or squat among the !naras, living on the fruit and collecting the seeds for sale to the traders...."
- b. Fishing, which apparently they did by harpooning the fish in the bay with a spear. The point of the spear was made of a Gemsbok horn.
- c. Occasional paid labor, which entailed unloading cargoes from the coasters docking in the bay.

In a situation where so much change is apparent, it is difficult to establish the role of a single economic factor such as the nara. Since much food is bought, it was necessary to know the sources of cash income. At Soutrivier these sources are limited to wages, to the sale of nara kernels and goats, and to government subsidies paid to old and ill people. The largest part of the cash probably originates from people employed in the fish factories, who send home money, food and clothing. When the villagers visit relatives in town, they take along meat, sometimes even a live goat, milk and nara melons or kernels. Cans of fish, bags of flour and mielie meal, coffee, tea, sugar, matches, tobacco and sweets are brought back.

Families who have members working at the Research Institute obviously gained more immediate benefits in terms of cash income than the people whose relatives work in town. At the beginning of 1974 three men from Homestead A held jobs at Gobabeb. Two of them received R42.00 a month and one received R60.00. In addition, an old woman of the homestead received an old age pension of R14.00 per month, bringing the total cash income of this homestead to R158.00, a large sum of money by the standards of Soutrivier. The result of this wealth was reflected in the ownership of a bicycle and a radio, and, on occasion, the purchase of brandy instead of wine. The interest in nara seemed less here than among the other families. One afternoon when I offered a lift to Nara Valley, members of the other two homesteads were keen to come along. However, the men of Homestead A remained sitting, chatting and drinking coffee under the trees near the river.

During the study period the homestead of Johanna Fischer (Homestead B) was entirely dependent on what relatives from town or from other villages would send, on the occasional payment for a load of washing for the scientists at the Institute, and on a small herd of goats.

But Gert's homestead (Homestead C) was poorer still, with the largest number of mouths to feed and no obvious ties with relatives as wealthy as those of Johanna Fischer. The most important income here consisted of an old-age and sick pension, which brought the total cash income to about R28.00 per month. When people of this homestead were asked how they managed to survive under such conditions, they replied that they still had some savings from the jobs held in the previous year, otherwise they "scratched here and they scratched there, until they had collected enough to take them through another day." If the worst came to the worst, the men would go out to work again for a couple of months.

In Soutrivier's economy any income is immediately spent on food or on other basic necessities. Drinking is a widespread habit, and a large part of any income goes into the acquisition of alcohol. The type of alcohol consumed seemed to reflect status. Whereas the

people of Homestead C brewed homemade beer, for which I was often asked to bring back the instant yeast when I went to town, members of Homestead A could afford brandy and often whole crates of wine.

To try to find out whether the nara was considered a source of wealth, I asked people whether they considered themselves rich, but no one did. When asked which Topnaar they thought were rich, they replied that no Topnaar were rich. After further consideration, some named either Sebedeus, from Homestead A, or Kootjie, from the village of Oswater. Sebedeus was named because he earned a lot of money and had been working at the Institute for eight years. Kootjie, the "Kaiser of the Kuiseb," was named because he owned a large herd of goats.²⁰ In answer to my question, some said that many years ago they in Sout-rivier had possessed large herds too, implying that they had not always been as poor as they were now. No two people could better exemplify the two extremes of changing values as Sebedeus and Kootjie.

Apparently the nara did not feature as a prestigious item. On the contrary, being dependent on nara as a source of food was considered degrading, since it implied that one did not have enough money to buy "the white man's" food, definitely a status symbol.

NARA AS A SOURCE OF INCOME

Among white schoolchildren in Swakopmund and Walvis Bay, nara kernels are known and eaten like other nuts -- for example, groundnuts. Upon investigation, I found that Mr. John Webster, a wholesaler in Walvis Bay, was the agent for nara kernels. Between October and April he makes his rounds of the villages along the Kuiseb in his Land Rover and buys the dried kernels. The Topnaar also come to him to sell their harvest of kernels, which they transport by donkey-cart. Mr. Webster himself drives as far as Soutrivier to purchase his yearly supply; he told me that this may amount to as much as five tons, on which he makes a profit of as much as 50 percent. However, Mr. Webster considers that the trade in nara seeds is a



rapidly declining concern.

The unit of measurement is a hessian sugar bag weighing about 30 kilograms, for which he pays the Topnaar R3.50. The standard price in 1974 was 10 cents per kilogram. Mr. Webster sells the kernels at 18 cents per kilogram to his most important customer, Mr. Ahmed of the Atlas Trading Company in Cape Town. Mr. Ahmed, in turn, sells to Atwells, a well-known bakery in Cape Town, and to stall-owners on the Cape Town "Parade." Here one can buy packets of "butter-pits" weighing about 50 grams for 35 cents. Butter-pits are eaten as a snack by the coloured, Malay, and white communities, and are also known in Somerset-West, which is some 80 kilometers from Cape Town.

COLLECTION AND PREPARATION OF NARA

Picking nara involves a great deal of time and hard work. Since the height of the season appears to be the first months of the year, picking frequently has to be done in very hot weather. A nara melon weighs more than a kilogram and is covered with thorns. Carrying a bag full of nara home over the hot sand dunes is therefore an arduous task. Not only is the fruit spiny, but the complete plant has thorns instead of leaves, an adaptation to desert conditions. Photosynthesis takes place directly through the stem.²¹

Nara are picked with the help of a digging-stick, approximately 50 centimeters long and tapered to a point. It is made from a young branch or sapling and the bark is usually removed, though a strip may be left around the handle.

The picker climbs to the top of a sandy hummock that partly covers the nara plants. There he prods the melon below to test for ripeness. If it is soft to the jab of the digging-stick and has the right green-yellow color, he separates it from the stem with the tip of the digging-stick. Then he lifts it out of its nest of thorny branches and twigs and tosses it so that it rolls down the sandy slope. Once several melons have been picked



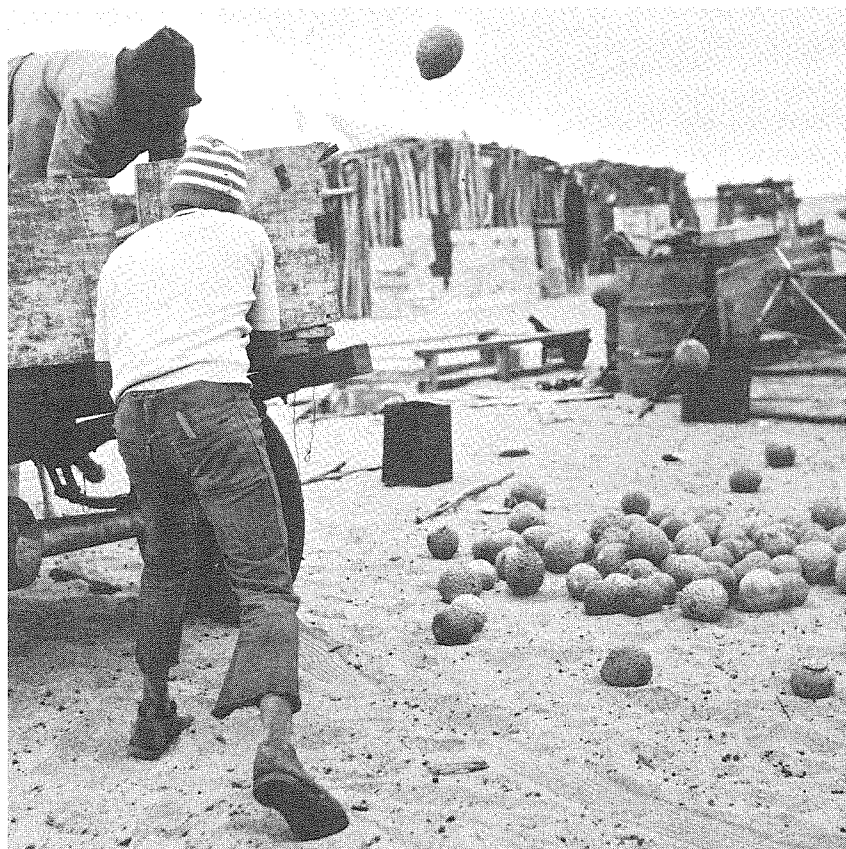


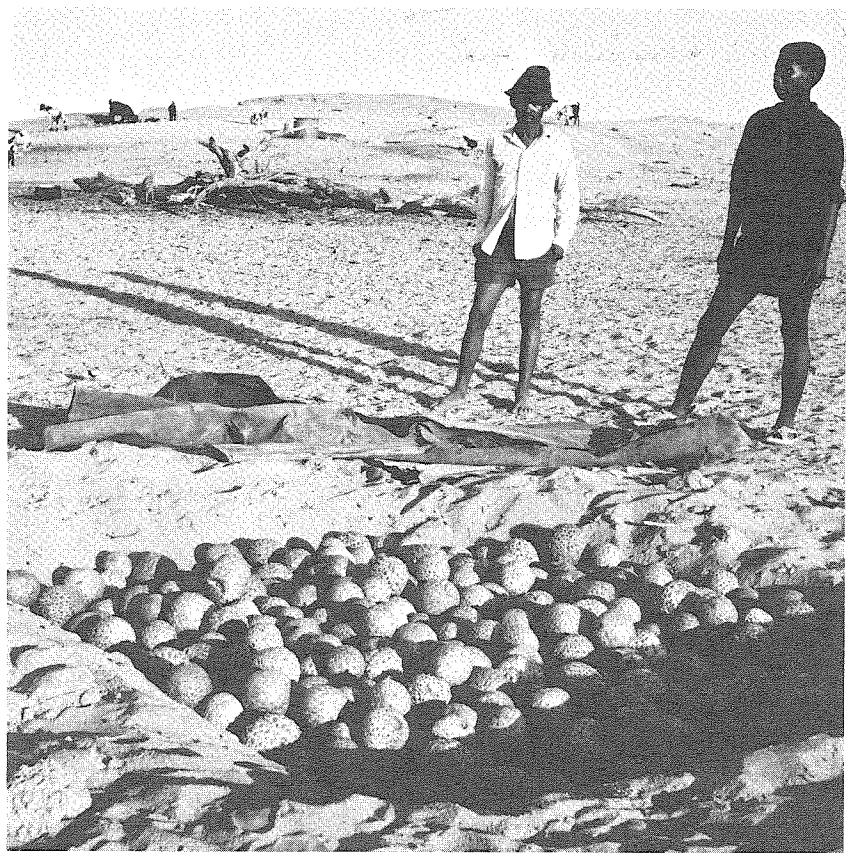
in this way, a further test of ripeness is applied. With a knife a disc is cut, almost coring the fruit. An orangy-pink color and a strong herbal smell indicate ripeness. Sometimes green fruits are left to the jackals, but this is considered a waste by some pickers, who prefer to put them all in a bag and take them home to ripen in the sun or to provide feed for the chickens and dogs.

During the month of February, when the most intensive study was done, nara picking seemed to take place sporadically, depending on whether transport was available (a lift in my car) or on whether someone was out on foot in search of straying donkeys. Throughout the time of my visit the Kuiseb was in full flood, making it impossible to cross into the nara fields on the opposite bank with the donkey-carts, the customary method of transport. In spite of that, however, as established through the questionnaire and direct observation, members of the different homesteads had been out picking nara on eight occasions in a period of about five weeks.

In the previous year Dr. Sandelowsky had been on a nara-picking trip, which was very much like a harvest. Two men of the family of Homestead A were visiting at the time, and she was told that a trip could be organized because they were present. It was not clear whether they had come specifically for this purpose. Dr. Sandelowsky followed the donkey-cart in a Land Rover, since she did not want to take up extra space and weight when they returned with a full load. The party left the village at mid-morning, followed the well-used cart track along the right bank, and crossed the river opposite to the place where the dune valley joins the Kuiseb bed. There was no hesitation over the route: a round trip to the head of Nara Valley, returning along a different route. Stops were made at large nara bushes. The men would leap from the cart, pick, test, and load without wasting a minute. It was all Dr. Sandelowsky could do to keep up with them, photographing, filming, and asking the odd question. Now and again one of the men would eat a few mouthfuls of a very ripe melon, but otherwise there was no break.

Late in the afternoon, with the donkey-cart brimful of nara, they were back, stopping first at the house



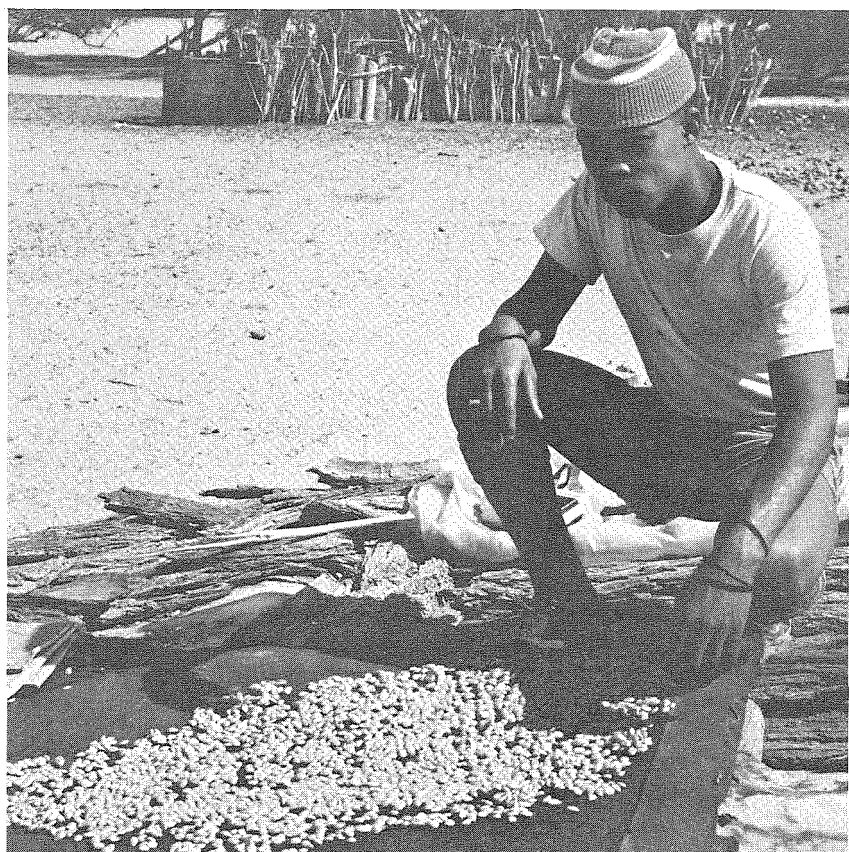


of Johanna Fischer, to hand her a part of the harvest. At Homestead A, the melons were unloaded and the donkeys were unharnessed. A large hole, about 50 centimeters deep, had been dug. The nara were put into this and covered with a piece of canvas, after which sand was thrown on top.

Four days later when Dr. Sandelowsky came back, she found two men removing the nara melons from the hole and peeling them by cutting the melon in half and then loosening the sections with a knife, as one would do with a grapefruit. The fruit was soft and the flesh came away easily. It was then put into a large bucket, while the peels were thrown to the goats and donkeys. When all the fruit had been peeled, it was placed in a petrol drum cut in half. No water was added. It was cooked over an open fire for almost four hours until it liquified, watched by a man who stirred it at intervals. At one point, a woman came to get some of the "soup," straining off the pips. She mixed this with mielie meal porridge, making a pleasantly sweet dish.

I watched women preparing a similar dish when only one or two nara melons were available. As the soup in the pot over the fire became more liquid, it was whipped with a wooden whisk. A little water was added and then the pips were strained off. Slowly some flour was added, while the soup was whisked.

In the case of the soup cooked after the large harvest, the kernels were removed by means of a bucket sieve, made from a four-pound tin can, into the bottom and sides of which holes had been driven with a nail and to which a wire handle was attached. This sieve was dipped into the soup, with semicircular movements of the wrist to swing the sieve to and fro so that the soup ran out through the holes while the kernels remained behind. These were then carried by bucket to be spread on the roof of a hut to dry. Noticing two different lots of kernels, Dr. Sandelowsky asked what the difference was. Those that were to be sold to whites, she was told, were to be as clean as possible and have no flesh adhering to them. But the flesh was left on those for home use because it made them sweeter. Cracking them between the two front teeth, as the Topnaar do, makes one appreciate



their sweetness. Whites crack the kernels between their fingers or with their fingernails and throw the seed coat away.

This may be a result of Dinter's report²² that the Topnaar made use of the alimentary canal method of cleaning the pips, an idea challenged by Herre²³ on the basis of the difficulty of cleaning sufficient amounts of pips in this manner -- 30 tons a year, as reported by Dinter -- taking into consideration the size both of groups and of individuals among the Topnaar.

The thin porridge or soup of the cooked nara is poured onto a patch of clean sand, far enough from the houses to be out of reach of the domestic animals. As it is poured, it spreads into the shape of a large pancake, which is left on the sand to dry. The explanation given was that in this way the fat or oil can drain from the #goa-garibeb, or nara cake. After two or three days it is turned over, so that the oil from the other side can also drain away. When the nara cake is dry, it has a leathery texture. It is rolled between the hands and then rubbed between the fingers to remove the sand. Finally it is cut into strips, rolled up, and eaten as a sweet. I have kept one for two years and it is still edible. In this way the flesh of the nara can be stored for a long time. Kernels were kept for about a year, after which they went rancid.

Nara are also eaten uncooked but must then be cool, since otherwise, according to the Topnaar, they make one ill. Eating too much nara at once, or eating unripe nara, makes the mouth and lips burn. When eaten raw, the fruit is cut in half. The central core, which is the sweetest part, is cut out first and eaten from the tip of the knife, after which the sections between the rows of kernels are eaten in a similar fashion.

On a number of occasions people hinted that nara could be used for the brewing of beer, but they were reluctant to expand on this because alcoholism is frowned upon by whites.

A female informant said that the oil of the ground kernels was traditionally used to lubricate the skin.

OWNERSHIP OF NARA BUSHES

Schapera makes mention of the nara bushes belonging to individual people. "The only instance recorded of recognised private ownership of land or its resources occurs . . . in the !nara bushveld of the Kuiseb regions behind Walvis Bay. Here each family has an hereditary claim to certain !nara bushes and their fruits. Trespass by other members of the tribe is reported to the chief and dealt with by him; but if the thief is a Bergdamara or Bushman, he is tracked and simply shot down. . . ."²⁴

Once I found, in a nara patch not far from Soutrivier, a table-like construction of poles and branches, on which stood containers and utensils that, I was told, were used for cooking nara. Dr. Sandelowsky saw a similar construction in a large forked tree at Swartbank. These are called "Hottentot tables" by the Topnaar, and are left in the nara area until people return for a harvest. One of the older men, Ou Joop of Homestead C, was said to come to the "table" at Nara Valley. I received only an evasive reply when I asked whether or not he owned it. A few days later, when we were again in the area, one of the women remarked that "Ou Joop was so stingy with his nara."

The same informant told me that in olden days people owned the nara patches. If people came to pick at nara patches that did not belong to them, there would be a lot of fighting. However, she added, this was long ago, when her father used to go out to collect and process nara.

THE PLACE OF NARA IN THE DIET

The Topnaar eat twice a day, sometimes only once. The meals are frugal, consisting usually of porridge or a piece of their home-baked bread and a cup of tea or coffee. Meat is rare. In February 1974 goats were

slaughtered on three occasions at Homestead C and twice at Homestead A. Informants said that goats were slaughtered only when no other food was available. Goat milk, which was available daily, is perhaps the most important nutrient. Chickens are kept for eggs.

At times just after a nara pick, children might be seen nibbling nara pips for a couple of days. Adults would carry a handful tied up in a handkerchief or shawl.

Mr. Webster maintains that the nara is an emergency food supply today.²⁵ This agrees with what informants told me. One said that it was the food from the shops that made his life. A woman visiting at Soutrivier said that nara was like a snack or like a fruit such as spanspek or watermelon, and that one could not live on snacks or fruit.

After I had been talking to people for a few days, it struck me that the adults from Homestead C were the most reluctant to talk about the nara, and one young man flatly refused me an interview. They denied eating it. I tried to observe what they were eating, but I never saw them eating nara. This was curious, because many informants had referred me to an elderly member of Homestead C, who apparently knew all about nara picking and preparation. Also, children from this homestead would be eating and cracking nara pips more often than those from the other homesteads.

Some tension seemed to exist between Homesteads B and C. This culminated one afternoon when I was sitting under a tree talking to two members of Homestead B. A man from Homestead C came to us and, obviously annoyed, said to the woman talking to me: "You are for ever sitting here - talking, talking. I know just as much about the nara as you do, if not more!" When he left, the woman told me that the people from Homestead C bury the nara they gather. She did not make it clear whether they buried them to ripen them further (a common practice) or to hide them. Further investigation on my part, undertaken at times when I could not normally be expected to be in the vicinity, gave no indication of unusual behavior on the part of members of Homestead C.

The situation was explained to me later. The cash income of R28.00 from two pensions was insufficient for sixteen people. No one had a job, nor did any relatives send money or food. The nara were therefore an essential item in the diet of Homestead C. Now it also became clear to me why the nara patch closest to Soutrivier was said to belong to a member of Homestead C and why he was known to be stingy with his nara. Being dependent on nara implies being poor, and being poor implies having no cash to buy more desirable commodities, such as canned food. Since Soutrivier is a community in transition, the possession of certain articles -- for example, a radio -- indicates a relatively high social status. The same principle applies to the type of food eaten, and dependence on nara has become an indication of low social status.

Further information that I could relate to Homestead C's reluctance to discuss the nara was an account I heard at the Institute. A botanist, doing an intensive study of the nara, had gone to Nara Valley and collected a truckful of ripe melons, which he needed for his work. He was probably totally unaware of what this might do to the indigenous community, but if your life depends on a certain food, it is not difficult to understand that you become secretive as to its whereabouts after such an incident.

In spite of their poverty, the people at Soutrivier are generous and openhanded. Whenever I went to a homestead where a meal had been prepared, I was also offered food. Once I came upon a woman and two children who were eating a ripe nara. I was automatically included in the precise sharing among the four of us. On several occasions I was given two, three, and once even six eggs as a present when I went home. I did not want to disturb this relationship by refusing the gifts or by offering to pay for them. Before I left at the end of February, I provided some wine and food, and spent an afternoon with those people with whom I had had the closest contact. This was the only occasion resembling a feast that I observed during the time I spent at Soutrivier. Dr. Sandelowsky's observations support this. Although she did not have daily contact with the people, she was informed of such occasions as births, deaths, marriages,

or visits of persons considered to be important. Throughout her three years at Gobabeb, she did not hear of any celebration resembling a party.

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF NARA

The Topnaar like to talk, and they talk a lot. Certain topics, such as hunting, child-bearing, pregnancy, and sexual behavior appeared to be avoided, but other topics, such as place-names, places of previous employment, animals, and even the staff at the Institute, were freely discussed. During one of these conversations I was told the story about the origin of nara as a source of food: "One day a woman was walking through the dunes with her dog. She was very hungry. Her dog came across some nara. He sniffed at them and ate some of the melon. She watched him, and when she discovered that the fruit had no ill effect on him, she went back the next day to get some to eat for herself." Dr. Sandelowsky had been told a similar version.

I found little of ceremony or ritual based on the praise of the nara. However, one song, particularly for children, about the benefits of nara as a food was recited by an informant. It is identical with the only song Moritz²⁶ recorded among the people at the Kuiseb:

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| !Gai #usa !Nara heise | Good food, nara tree, |
| //khuxa #ûsa #ken #ûse, | thorny food, sweet food, |
| #Aunin ôana deisi khreo. | Topnaar children grow up, sucking milk. |

Moritz described how an old woman from Iduseb, a village downstream from Soutrivier, mimed a nara harvest. She would take a stick, with which she tested whether the nara were ripe. "Tsou, tsou" -- "ripe, ripe," she would call, acting as though she were throwing melons out of a thorny plant.

A white woman living on a farm near Sesriem, at the edge of the Namib, recited the following nara songs to Moritz.

Kirki hî, hirki hî

/haraxa mûse,

// goa // gams.

!Narana xu ra /kin,

!oub di !narana.

Kirki hî, kirki hî (sound
of the guinea fowl)

wart-eye

water-drinker early in
the morning.

They come from the nara,
the nara of the fields.

There is another, similar, version:

Kirki hî, haraxa mûse,
// goa- // gamsa ra a tse.

!Narana ra saotse,
!nawas // gam (sa ra a) se.

Ti !narase // gama-daose,

Hisaruse // gama-daose.

Kirki hî, wart-eye,
drinker of water early in
the morning.

Follow the nara bushes,
where the rhinoceros
drinks water.

My nara bushes, on the
way to the water,
vultures, on the way to
the water.

In Bethany, a village some 500 kilometers south of Walvis Bay, Moritz came across an old Topnaar who still appreciated good gos-garibeb, and who sang the following song:

Deixa heise, abogu heise! Tree rich of milk, tree of
the fathers.

Deixa heise, abogu heise! Tree rich of milk, tree of
the fathers.

// koaxa deië ra uhâba te, Tree, having tasty milk
for me

// koa ra deië, ra ā gei which lets me drink tasty
milk,

// koa ra deië ra mate se. which gives me tasty milk.

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Hahihoho // koa ra deië he. | Hahihoho, tasty milk (he). |
| Aboxan heise, aoboxan | Tree of the fathers, tree |
| heise he, | of the fathers, |
| !gâi deiëu hâheise he. | Tree, which has good milk |
| | (he), |
| Ti heise !gâi heise he, | My tree, good tree (he), |
| !gâi blomna u hâheise, | Tree, which has beautiful |
| | flowers, |
| // khuxa-/kha heise he, | Tree with thorns (he), |
| !gâi heise he hehehe, | Beautiful tree (he hehehe), |
| Āta ra deië u hâheise. | I drink the milk, which |
| | you have, tree! |

Although patent medicines are common, the nara also plays its part in traditional cures. A woman of Homestead A was once seen wearing three perforated nara seeds on a string around her neck. This, she said, would help her chest cold.

OTHER WILD PLANTS

Except for the nara in the immediate vicinity of Soutrivier the Topnaar utilized very few plants for purposes other than animal fodder. Only under the most dire circumstances would they eat the pulp of the Acacia giraffae pods, though they used the bark and wood of the acacia trees for building purposes. Similarly, they used the thinner, more pliable bark of the Gomphocarpus fruticosus bush as string. Only one other bush, Grewia flavescens, which grew in the Kuiseb River, was pointed out as having edible berries.

One day, as mentioned earlier, I took three informants, one woman and two men, to the Mirabib Hill area, a part of the Namib known to them. The enthusiasm and rapidity with which names and uses of plants were pointed out was amazing. Some plants were known, but apparently served no obvious domestic purposes. Others were said to be useful for food, drink or medicine.

SPECIESUSESAcacia africanus

Both the wood and the gum are used.

Adenolobus pechueli

The roots are used for treating liver complaints.

Asparagus denudatus

Can be put onto burns.

Boscia foetida

Berries eaten.

Commiphora saxicola

The juicy stem is thirst-quenching.

Lily

"Uintjies" are eaten.

Monsonia senegalensis

The leaves are added to tea. The seeds, freed of the husk, are roasted. They taste like peanuts. The seeds, with sugar and mielie-meal, are also used to brew beer.

Montinia caryophyllacea

The hollow branches are used to make stems for pipes.

Parkinsonia africana

Leaves used as medicine. Fruit used as a beverage.

Senecio alliariifolius

Used as a broom.

Tephrosia dregeana

The roots can be eaten with milk. They taste sweet and smell good.

Plants that were identified, but for which no specific use was given, are the following:

Chascanum gariepenseMonsonia umbellataCleome luederitzianaNolletiaEuphorbia phyllocladaOsteospermum microcarpumIndigofera auricomaPolygalaLimeumStipagrostis ciliataMonechma arenicolaTribulus zeyheri

CONCLUSION

The Topnaar way of life is changing fast. I assume that much of the evidence collected about the nara represents only an indication of what used to be custom in traditional Topnaar society. To this day every child knows what nara is, that you can eat it, how to crack the pips inside your mouth, and how the nara and the nara cakes are prepared. The characteristics, requirements, and distribution of the plant are common knowledge.

There is no question that as a source of food along the Kuiseb the nara is by far the most important of the plants. In answer to the question, "What other wild plants do you use?" people would almost invariably say, "There are no other plants." Only when pushed or when reminded of such plants as the "Rosyntjie Bos" (Grewia flavescens) would informants agree that they could be used, but added that they were hard to find.

It is difficult to assess the importance of the nara in relation to the importance of hunting in earlier days, since hunting is no longer allowed. As in many rural societies, animals seem to be considered more important than plants, though the keeping of livestock is becoming arduous. With a drain of laborers into the towns and into industry, the few old men and women are left to take care of large groups of children and cannot cope with the extra duties imposed by livestock. Nevertheless, the prestige of the "Kaiser of the Kuiseb" is measured by the number of goats he owns and certainly not by the size of his garden patch. Considerable time is spent in the goat kraal or in tending the donkeys or feeding the chickens, but it is rare to see someone in the garden.

Women seem more closely connected with the care and ownership of animals than the men are. By contrast, with only one or two exceptions, the men were the ones to go and collect nara. The processing of nara on a large scale is also the business of men. One may question whether changes in the economic life of these people have resulted in changes in the traditional roles and patterns.

The statement made by Mr. Webster, the Walvis Bay dealer, that nara today is an emergency food is probably correct. But as such it can still play a vital role, as was demonstrated at Homestead C. Where there is enough money, as at Homestead A, it is true that food bought from the shops plays the main role in the life of the Topnaar.

In Topnaar society the nara is considered a low-prestige food, and it would seem that its importance as a source of cash income is dwindling. In traditional society the nara appear to have been of considerable significance, as we may infer from the songs about the plant and its use for medicinal and other purposes.

The element of traveling, visiting, and general mobility struck me as important. It was brought home to me most forcefully when I returned to Soutrivier in July 1974. The village seemed somewhat deserted. Of the 32 people who had been there in the previous February, 10 had left. I found that either the homesteads were locked up or that most members had gone. The reason invariably given was that the inhabitants had gone to look for food or work or money. The obvious inference was that in July there are no nara. I checked this and could not find a single ripe nara melon. The nara may well have dictated patterns of seasonal mobility in prehistoric times.

FOOTNOTES

1. In the Nama language numerous diacritical marks are used to indicate vocal sounds and inflections. Here we have given the Nama form the first time a term appears, and thereafter have used the more common form. The Nama orthography has been taken from Nama Worterbuch, by J. G. Krönlein, as revised and edited by F. Rust (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1969).
2. Sir James Alexander, An Expedition into the Interior of Africa (London: Henry Colburn, 1838), Vol 2, p. 84.
3. A. W. Hoernlé, "The Social Organisation of the Nama Hottentots of Southern Africa," American Anthropologist 27 (1925): 6.
4. O. Koehler, "Die Topnaar-Hottentoten am unteren Kuiseb," in Ethnological and Linguistic Studies in Honour of N. J. van Warmelo (Pretoria: Department of Bantu Administration and Development, Ethnological Publications No. 52, 1969), p. 101.
5. Ibid., p. 100
6. W. Palgrave, Report of Coates Palgrave Esq. of His Mission to Damaraland and Great Namaqualand (Cape Town: Saul, Solomon and Co., 1876), pp. 6, 94.
7. T. Jenkins and C. K. Brain, "The People of the Lower Kuiseb Valley, S.W.A.," Scientific Papers of the Namib Desert Research Station 35 (1967): 6.
8. Koehler, p. 106.
9. Dr. Beatrice Sandelowsky, personal communication.
10. Koehler, pp. 114-15.
11. I. Schapera, The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1930), p. 48.

12. Hoernlé, p. 5.
13. Schapera, p. 225.
14. N. Mossolow, "Die Geschichte von Rooibank-Scheppmannsdorf," Afrikanischer Heimatkalender (Windhoek: 1959), p. 2.
15. Palgrave, p. 94.
16. H. Herre, Die Narapflanze in Namib und Meer (Swakopmund: Gesellschaft für Wissenschaftliche Entwicklung und Museum Swakopmund, 1974/75), p. 27.
17. Koehler, p. 116.
18. Jenkins and Brain, p. 6.
19. Koehler, pp. 113-14.
20. Jenkins and Brain counted 460 goats at Oswater in 1967 (p. 10).
21. W. Giess, "Veldkost in Sudwest Afrika," South West Africa Scientific Journal 20 (1965/66): 67.
22. K. Dinter, Vegetabilische Veldkost in Südwest Afrika (Okahandja: Selbstverlag, 1912).
23. Herre, p. 30.
24. Schapera, p. 291.
25. John Webster, personal communication.
26. W. Moritz, "Entdeckung und Sprachliche Fixierung der Naralieder bei den Topnaar am Kuiseb," Afrikanischer Heimatkalender (Windhoek: 1975), pp. 150-52.

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